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## SEEING CLASSICS AS WHOLE<sup>1</sup>

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In 1893 my brother and I made a trip to Chicago to see the World's Fair. We were landed there one morning in the heart of the throbbing "loop district," two green country boys, with the task before us of finding the rooms we had engaged. I was never more confused in all my life. The rattling wagons and cars, the hurrying people, the big buildings, and the streets running in every direction made so difficult a tangle of troubles for us that we finally gave ourselves up to a policeman, who put us on a car and headed us for the right place. After finding our lodgings and getting ourselves straightened up, we dared again to go into the heart of the city. Our confusion was almost as great as at first; but luckily, as we were walking down State Street, like two babes lost in the woods, we met a friend from home.

"Why don't you boys go to the top of the Masonic Temple and take a look over the city?" he asked. We followed his suggestion, took one of the big elevators, and were soon lifted twenty-two stories in air. As we walked around the observatory platform the city in all its setting spread itself like an animated map before and below us. On the east, Lake Michigan; to the south, the west, the north, the checkered mass of business blocks and other buildings, spreading far away over the Illinois prairie, the Chicago River winding its way among them. The great Exposition appeared on the shores of the lake some seven miles distant, and other points of interest were observable in various directions. The whole plan of the city was revealed in one bird's-eye view. Since that sight I have never been at a loss to direct myself in Chicago. And since then, too, whenever I visit a large city for the first time, I always try to get to the top of some hill, some "skyscraper," or some

<sup>1</sup> Read before the National Council of Teachers of English, at Portland, Oregon, July, 1917.

monument and take in the city as a whole before beginning a study of it in detail.

The application of this personal parable to the subject at hand is probably plain enough, but it will be made much clearer by another illustration from experience.

My first introduction to the study of Shakespeare was in a theater. At one time Robert Downing presented *Julius Caesar* in a matinee especially for the high-school and university students of our city. I came to the play with absolutely no knowledge of Shakespeare, except that at one time I had been given the task of diagramming "Lend me your ears," or "They offered Caesar the crown three times." Other than this, I was an unspoiled pupil in the study of the great dramatist. I sat there entranced as Downing portrayed the part of Mark Antony with fine spirit, rather ably seconded by his support. The play proved a thrilling treat. The swing and sweep of it, the martial spirit, so caught and fired my boy heart with interest that I hurried home, took down my ancient history, and read all I could about the times of Julius Caesar. Then I read the play, and re-read it. I learned some of its ringing lines, and I have loved it ever since.

Some two years after this our class had to study *Hamlet*. It was one of the requirements, and the teacher made a very painstaking task of it. Most of our time was spent in tearing Shakespeare's passions "to tatters; to very rags," to find the similes, the metaphors, the obsolete words, and in chasing down their forgotten meanings through the dictionaries. We toiled over the classic, line upon line, speech upon speech, until the class was surely sick of it, and ready to agree with Mark Twain that "a classic is a book which everybody praises and nobody reads."

This super-scientific attitude in studying literature is responsible largely for our failure to lead pupils to appreciate and enjoy the classics. Too many teachers kill the selection by over-analysis. They are much like the botanist who, when presented an American Beauty rose by his lady-love, said, "Why, what a wonderful specimen. I wonder how many petals it has!" And he proceeded straightway to count them. Dr. Balliet, speaking of the futility of an analytical method in teaching the beauties of literature, once

reminded the teachers that "one cannot learn the meaning of sorrow by making a chemical analysis of a tear."

The great charm of any work of art, whether a rose that springs from nature's hand or a painting, a symphony, or a poem, comes first of all from the creation as a whole. And all later study of detail, to bring added charm, must be made with relation to the whole. Only through the unit presentation method can the child be led to an appreciative understanding of any literary selection.

The old story of "The Blind Men and the Elephant" illuminates this point. If we had any adequate means of examining the impressions that children get from the study of a selection of literature by the piecemeal method we should find, I am sure, conceptions in their minds very suggestive of those that the blind men got of the elephant. It is a psychologically sound doctrine that a part can be learned only in relation to the whole. From the whole to the parts should therefore be the procedure in teaching any subject. If, for example, I wished to explain a watch to the child, I should not bring one piece of it at a time, saying, "This is the dial plate, these the hands, this the main spring"; rather should I hold the whole watch before him and help him to discover the use and meaning of the various parts in their relation to the entire mechanism. Likewise, in presenting a classic, the first step should be to give in some way a bird's-eye view of the selection, then lead the pupil to discover and enjoy the literary details.

I recently observed a teacher present to a seventh-grade class the "Chambered Nautilus" by this method. To stimulate the interest and to give an appropriate setting, she held before them a broken shell. The pupils noted how the animal had built up the pearly coil chamber after chamber, each one progressively larger than the last. Then the teacher threw out the questions: "What thought does this shell suggest to you? What lesson of life comes to your mind as you think of the building of this structure?" Various replies were made. Finally one boy said, "It tells me to keep growing." "Very good," returned the teacher: "Your thought, Ned, is much like one that came one day to Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes when he was looking at such a shell as this in a museum. In what way, do you suppose, did he express his

thought?" The pupils were eager, of course, to know. They were directed to find the poem on a certain page in their readers. There was no need of further suggestion to study; each one was interested to find the central thought of the selection, and very soon all had discovered it. Then the teacher, by suggestive guidance, led them to see the literary beauties of the poem. They pictured in their minds the "ship of pearl" with "its webs of living gauze" sailing the tropic seas, "where coral reefs lie bare." They saw its "irised ceiling rent," its "sunless crypt revealed." They talked of its "dim dreaming life" and of its stealing "with soft step the shining archway through." They enjoyed the allusions to the sea-maids, the sirens, and old Triton with "his wreathèd horn." And finally they re-read the selection as a whole, voicing appreciatively and with fine feeling the melting music of its lines.

Four rather well-defined steps mark the method used in teaching the literature lesson just sketched:

1. The lesson setting was carefully made.
2. A first larger view of the selection was given.
3. The literary details were studied in the light of the whole.
4. The selection was re-read as a whole with a socialized motive.

To make clearer these steps, let each one be considered separately.

The lesson-setting is a most essential beginning of the study of any classic. Every successful farmer knows that the crop is half raised before ever the seed touches the ground. To throw seed upon unprepared soil is to cast it to the winds or to the birds. The ground must be first plowed and fertilized and properly moistened. Then it leaps to meet the seed, and the harvest is largely assured.

Likewise in teaching a selection in literature, the mind of the pupil should be stirred, made ready to receive it. To assign a lesson, as many teachers do, by saying peremptorily, "Turn to page 129, study the poem you find there, learn to define and spell the hard words, and come back prepared to read it," is like throwing a handful of seed on the pavement. But create the right atmosphere by re-creating the spirit, so far as may be, that produced the

classic, and success is largely assured. This is particularly true of selections of the lyric type. Back of every song worth teaching there lies a story. Back of every speech, too, that has stirred the souls of men are stirring events that have led up to the speech. The story largely carries its own setting; but every selection in literature must be properly prepared for if the pupil is to catch its spirit and read it as something alive.

Thus, to teach "The Star Spangled Banner" effectively we must give it in its historical setting. The best approach to Patrick Henry's "Appeal to Arms" is through the story of the struggle in the Virginia House of Burgesses which culminated in that stirring address. History tells what man has done; literature reflects how he felt about it. If the two were blended more closely, history would get a new thrill and literature new light.

The second step in the teaching of a selection presents a rather difficult problem, especially when applied to the presenting of classic stories. How is it practically possible to give the child at the outset a general view of the classic without killing the interest in the further study of it? When the setting is created, shall the selection be read by the teacher? Shall a sketch of it be made? Shall the pupils be allowed to skim the cream of it by a hurried reading? By what means can the class be given a bird's-eye view and still keep a glow of interest that brings the pupils back eager to get more?

The answer to this problem is to be found first of all in the selection itself. The method of attack should vary with the nature of the classic to be presented. In teaching shorter selections, like "The Ballad of the East and West," Tennyson's "Revenge," or even "Enoch Arden," the poem may be read as a whole first. "The Vision of Sir Launfal" can best be introduced by giving the story of the Holy Grail as a setting, then reading the poem as a unit.

With longer selections, such as *Evangeline*, *Miles Standish*, *Silas Marner*, *The Lady of the Lake*, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, *Julius Caesar*, and other selections, however, the attack is necessarily different. It is not possible to give these as wholes in single lessons, but it is possible to preserve their

unity and let the pupils have the opportunity to see them as wholes. Enough of the selection may be presented during the first lesson to stimulate the interest and to lay the larger lines of the story. The pupils should then be permitted, even encouraged, to follow and enjoy the story to the end in their own way.

A story is a moving-picture of life in words. Its chief interest lies in its action, its movement through the tangle of troubles. To deny a child the joy of watching this action is to rob him of the best that the story has to give.

"What kind of story do you like best?" I recently asked of a class.

"One in which there's something doing," came the quick response from a bright lad. "I like one that has lots of white between the lines," said one girl.

It is the life element that catches and holds the attention of children—the conversation, the action. This is particularly true in these days of the automobile, the airship, and the "movie." The only hope we have to hold the attention of the electric-minded boys and girls of these days on the classics is to make the classic move. My own lad, last year in the Freshman class of high school, voiced his impatience at the poky action of *Ivanhoe* by saying, petulantly, "Oh, pshaw, I'm tired of this thing. Why, it took two pages to get Rowena dressed."

The problem of presenting classics as wholes might be largely solved by something of a return to the old-time methods of the bards, the minstrels, and the troubadours. If less time were given to tearing literature to pieces and more to listening to the soulful oral reading of it, the appreciation of pupils for the classics would soon rise remarkably. Teachers should learn to voice literature properly, and pupils in turn should be trained to socialize their literature by sharing it with one another. The final test of our teaching of a given selection should be this: Can the child give it effectively to others?

I pause here to pay tribute to my mother. Whatever love for literature, whatever power I may have to interpret it, has come to me largely because she made it almost a religious practice in our

home to read aloud night after night beautiful stories and poems. She exemplified the lines of Longfellow wherein he says,

Then read from the treasured volume,  
The poem of thy choice,  
And lend to the rhyme of the poet  
The beauty of thy voice.

To gain an appreciation for the classic music one must often hear it produced effectively; likewise to gain a taste for literature one must hear it again and again properly voiced. Our great classics were created, not for the eye, but for the ear. "The ear," say the French, "is the pathway to the human heart"; and the prime purpose in teaching literature is to train the heart aright. Teachers should be trained in the oral interpretation of literature. If teachers are unable thus to read effectively the classics, other interpreters should be brought into our schools. The phonograph might well be made of great help here, where better means are lacking. Pupils should be given opportunities to hear the great classics voiced as wholes by great interpreters.

Do not mistake me on this point. In urging the necessity of teaching literature from the inspirational viewpoint, I have no thought to make mere impressionists of the teachers, nor to slight the essential study of the details. I realize very clearly that words must be taught and the mechanics of the selection mastered before the child can see its pictures clearly. Good corn cannot be raised without good husks; but at the same time we do not raise corn for the husks. The prime purpose in studying a classic is not to get facts, but to train the feelings. Literature is taught, not for information, but for inspiration. The child should be trained to look upon the printed page, not as a wall of words, but as a window through which to see pictures of life. Clear away the word obstructions that lie between him and the vision? Certainly. But keep his eye upon the larger picture. This is the third step in the unit presentation method—a careful study of the details with the full view of the whole.

As the fourth step, socialize the study still further by sharing the selection. The pupils should be given opportunity to voice the classic as a whole in the light of all the previous study of its



details. Finally, when this intensive study of a type selection has been completed, they should be turned into the clover field to browse for themselves among like literature.

May I vitalize this concluding point by another rather homely illustration? It was my privilege recently to be taught a good lesson by a farmer in a town where I chanced to be attending a teachers' institute. He was telling me about his experiences in dairying.

"These agricultural college professors," he went on to say, "don't know it all. Why, they come down here a year or so ago tellin' us how to make cows give more milk. We was to tie our cows up to a manger and feed 'em jest so much hay and so much grain, an' milk 'em regular as the clock. Wall, I follered their advice faithful enough until my herd got too big fer my stable, and then had to turn some of 'em out. But the first thing I begun to notice was that them cows that had a chance to pick about in the clover patch part of the time was givin' more milk than the college-fed ones. And I told the professors 'bout it next time they come round preachin', and they made an investigation, and they had to admit it, but it mighty nigh killed 'em to do it."

The moral needs no reinforcing, I think. Its application to the point is clear. What we teachers need, however, is courage enough to admit that our methods in teaching literature by tying children up to a manger and feeding them the husks required by colleges are not getting the results we seek, and we should be ready to take up a more progressive plan.

Let the pupils take certain classics for intensive study, of course; but, this done, guide them into the larger fields to browse for themselves. Occasionally provide for literary recitals wherein each pupil has part. Instead of the lesson-grind, let them have "An Hour with Longfellow," "A Visit with Mark Twain," "An Evening with Dickens," or other writers. Plan the dramatization of various plays, or give a program on "Our Country in Song and Story."

There are many ways by which the classics may be vitalized and socialized and uplifted into the realm of life and meaning when teachers take this larger view of the teaching of literature in our schools.